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Test Likely to Accelerate U.S.-Soviet Space Race

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This fall, the White House announced yesterday, an F15 fighter plane is scheduled to fly to the edge of space to try for the first time punching a hole in an orbiting satellite.

This test, whether successful or not, will accelerate the U.S.-Soviet race to seize the initiative in space to win any future war on the ground.

The Reagan administration made clear yesterday that it does not intend to drop out of the race, or stop it, until it has developed antisatellite weapons.

The weapon to be fired from the F15 looks like a big tomato can. It will depend on a collision, not an explosion, to destroy the target satellite by homing in on its heat after being fired toward it by the F15.

Space is littered with U.S. satellites that have outlived their usefulness and are just sailing around Earth like the Flying Dutchman. Defense officials said yesterday that one of these worn-out satellites will be the target of Air Force ASAT, for antisatellite, weapon in the test next month or in October.

Administration officials said yesterday that they wanted to conduct the test before the November summit meeting between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, but added that they wanted to leave a decent diplomatic interval between the test and the summit.

This timetable led the administration to alter plans for the ASAT test, the officials said.

Instead of using a special target consisting of a big balloon flying in a low Earth orbit, as originally planned, this test will be conducted against an obsolete satellite already in space.

The balloon target device has been plagued by technical difficulties that forced postponement of earlier ASAT tests, and officials evidently feared it would not be ready early this fall. The ASAT device itself has also had technical problems, but the Pentagon apparently believes it will be in working order for this pre-summit experiment.

ASAT guidance sheets the administration provided for its spokesman said that "there is no reason why this test should have any impact on the [summit] meeting. A U.S. ASAT capability is required to restore the military balance in this area. The Soviet Union has had an operational ASAT system for years."

The administration did not mention that the United States started working on antisatellites in the 1950s under the Air Force SAINT, for satellite intercept, program. Nor did the administration note that in the early 1960s the United States deployed antisatellite weapons on Kwajalein and Johnston islands in the Pacific, using modified Nike Zeus and Thor rockets as boosters. Defense officials in the 1960s bragged about this antisatellite capability, although it was limited to satellites that flew within its range.

The Soviets deployed their antisatellite weapons late in the 1960s. Pentagon specialists consider them crude. The Soviet killer satellite can only threaten U.S. satellites in relatively low orbits a few hundred miles above the Earth, the zone used by reconnaissance satellites, not communications craft, which hang in space about 23,000 miles up.

If past is prologue, the Soviets will develop new ASAT weapons to try outdoing the one the United States will test this fall and others in development. The Pentagon warns that the Soviets are far along on lasers that could be used against U.S. satellites.

Critics of the administration's refusal to negotiate a moratorium with the Soviets on ASAT weapons contend that the United States has much more to lose in this new arena than the Soviet Union.

The United States would depend on satellites to coordinate its nuclear forces in a war.

For conventional operations, the United States has put up a network of satellites for reconnaissance, communications, navigation and fire control.

Backers of Reagan's move to seize the high ground counter that outer space already has been militarized and the United States does not dare concede dominance there to the Soviets.